

## CONTINGENCY AND EVENT IN CHINA'S NEW DOCUMENTARY FILM MOVEMENT

### Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of contingency and the event *vis-à-vis* “private” and “public” documentaries. In China, the “private” and the “public” documentary form are often understood as mutually antagonistic, with the former defining itself explicitly against the latter. Rather than dwell on these differences, many of which are both well-documented and legitimate, I intend here to demonstrate how in certain ways, the “private” documentary form may actually be seen as a logical culmination of the *xianchang* [shooting live] aesthetic initiated by the early pioneers of the New Documentary Film Movement [hereafter NDFM]. In order to do this, I will focus on the issue of the spontaneous event, and its connection with the two documentary forms. After outlining the theoretical relationship between the spontaneous event and the problem of contingency, I proceed to suggest that the early NDFM's relationship with this aspect of shooting live was in fact highly conflicted, and that the development of the “public” documentary form was in part a response to such tension. In fact, it was a means of limiting exposure to the contingent as understood in these terms. In the “private” documentary form, such inhibitions have been shed in favour of drawing the contingent event into the heart of the documentary film, something I argue is not in fact restricted to the “private” genre, but characteristic of a range of contemporary documentary film work. This reflects not only changes in documentary film practice, but also how understandings both of what a documentary is, and what it does, have altered in the decade since the NDFM's inception.

### Contingency and the Spontaneous Event

The importance of the “spontaneous event” to the NDFM as a signifier of “realism” has been noted by scholars. As Chris Berry has remarked, one of the key defining features of the NDFM is its commitment to *jishizhuyi*, or what he terms “on-the-spot realism” (Berry 2002: 124). In the context of documentary practice, this entails the realisation of “a spontaneous and unscripted quality that is a fundamental and defining characteristic distinguishing [*jishizhuyi*] from the old scripted realism of the special topic films” (Berry 2002: 124).<sup>1</sup> One of the ways in which this occurs is through a focus on “events that conspicuously signify spontaneity and lack of script” (Berry 2002: 124). Yet central as this may be, what does it actually mean? How are we to understand the concept of the spontaneous event? Equally importantly, how did the directors and critics themselves understand the concept?

Berry illustrates his point with reference to the now infamous moment in Wu Wenguang's *Bumming in Beijing* (1990) in which the painter Zhang Xiaping suffers a

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<sup>1</sup> The special topic film, or *zhuantopian*, was the standard Chinese television documentary format of the 1980s. It generally took the form of a pre-scripted, illustrated lecture, dominated by voice-over, and frequently compiled from pre-shot archival clips.

nervous collapse on camera. In what is essentially one extended scene, broken down into two long shots and bookended with interview commentary from friend and fellow documentary subject Mou Sen, we watch as Zhang lapses into madness whilst preparing for a gallery exhibition. She claims to be the voice of God; she questions the subject-matter of her own self-portrait ("Is it a man or a woman?"); then we cut to a shot of her lying on the ground, gazing at the ceiling whilst crying, laughing, and calling out to God, "Who the fuck am I?" In this particularly lengthy second shot, Wu Wenguang's camera moves between close-up and medium-long shot, apparently as unsure of how to respond to Zhang's predicament as the two members of the public (or are they fellow artists?) who wander into and then off camera, carefully picking their way through the incomplete display of the artist's work.

This event is "spontaneous" in the most literal sense. It was not scripted into the film, because it was entirely unforeseen. Wu Wenguang could no more have predicted what he was about to encounter than we, the audience, are in a position to anticipate it on initial viewing. As such, the event nicely corroborates Jia Zhangke's comment about shooting live: "Experience told me that when you were shooting on a live location, many unexpected things would occur" (Z. Jia and X. Lin 1999: 10). Jia is here referring to feature film: the situation is further exacerbated when one is dealing with documentary, where by the early 1990s, to quote Lin Xudong, "the ability to [...] record events *as they unfolded* [my emphasis] came to be viewed as a fundamental professional qualification for documentary cinematographers" (X. Lin: 2005).

The key issue here is one of control, or more particularly the control exerted by the director over his or her pro-filmic material. Dai Vaughan, in an essay on the earliest of western documentary shorts, the Lumière brothers' "actualities", has underlined their particular fascination with the spontaneous event.<sup>2</sup> Sometimes such an event is natural; for example, the waves that suddenly threaten to overwhelm the rowing boat in *A Boat Leaving the Harbour*. On other occasions it is a question of human intention, as in the case of the interaction between the gardener and the boy in *L'Arroseur Arosé*. Yet in each instance the issue of spontaneity comes down to that which "is not predictable by – and not under the control of – the filmmaker" (Vaughan 1999: 7). Vaughan argues that it is this quality that distinguished early film from theatre, which was why it initially fascinated directors. In the case of the early NDC, such lack of control over their environment clearly distinguishes the documentary makers from the studio tradition of the 1980s, and attests to their presence "on the scene" of the events that they depict as having taken place.

By situating the unplanned pro-filmic event at the heart of the *xianchang* aesthetic, the NDFM directors were, consciously or otherwise, moving towards a form of realism redolent of André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer: one that displayed "the affinity of film for haphazard contingencies" (Kracauer 1997: 62). In this formulation, uncontrollable

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<sup>2</sup> The actuality, or topical film, was the dominant genre of very early cinema, and dealt with current events or incidents of general interest, including: the demolition of buildings; fires; the aftermath of natural disasters; prize fights; family scenes; work scenes; and travelogues (Doane 2002: 142).

chance occurrences captured on film are visceral signifiers of reality and its attendant imperfections. Thus, certain kinds of event are seen as the *site* of contingency – here understood as chance or the unexpected – or at least as its embodiment.<sup>3</sup> Yet the incorporation of the spontaneous pro-filmic event into the documentary form immediately poses questions at the diegetic level; after all, film is not simply the encounter between the camera and the world, but also the representation of this world by the director. Vaughan acknowledges as much when he maintains that, for the earliest exponents of cinema, the spontaneous constituted “an escape of the represented from the representational act” (Vaughan 1999: 6). There were no conventions to indicate how the unexpected should be represented or interpreted: its inherently asystematic nature defied attempts at capture through the established semiotic codes – “the laboriousness of painted highlights and the drudgery of metaphor” (Vaughan 1999: 6) – of the traditional fine arts. Thus, the meaning of the spontaneous pro-filmic event in these early films was not predetermined or sign-posted, but generated by accident. It was significant because it had happened, not because it signified anything beyond this; it could thus “mean” anything or nothing. The fascination of actualities as a form lay precisely in “the camera’s ability to “catch” moments, to itself be surprised by meaning” (Doane 2002: 180).<sup>4</sup>

In placing the spontaneous event outside of signification, Vaughan effectively aligns it with the point of absolute contingency; that which is inassimilable, or prior to, meaning.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For example, Ivone Margulies argues that Bazin’s writing, far from demonstrating a naïve belief in filmic realism as simple verisimilitude, is informed by “a heightened sense of the eclectic materiality of film” (Margulies 2003: 3). She suggests Bazin was particularly interested in the inherent *incommensurability* of “the moment of encounter [...] between representation and the actuality of filmmaking” (Margulies 2003: 4). For him, film’s realism therefore lay in its status as record of the “clash of different material orders” (Margulies 2003: 3): the act of film-making and the filmed event. Precisely because of the differences between the process of representation and the material activity being represented, absolute verisimilitude was never a possibility. Instead, Bazin perceived the real in those moments of inevitable, if unintended, imperfection, in which reality subverts the expectations of the film-maker. The unfortunate angle of Louis XVI’s wig in Renoir’s *La Marseillaise*; the little boy deciding to take a piss in *Bicycle Thieves*, because he suddenly needs to; the absurd conundrum whereby the bridge which really spans the River Kwai could not be allowed to survive the course of the film; all of these moments – which Margulies describes as incidental or contingent – contribute to the particular nature of cinematic realism (Margulies 2003: 3). This concept of particular events as the site of contingency has since been developed by other film theorists (see e.g. Elsaesser 1990).

<sup>4</sup> To illustrate her point, Mary-Anne Doane cites an Edison short from 1901, *What Happened on Twenty-third Street*. In this, a man and a woman, emerging from out of a city street scene, are caught unawares by a gust of wind which suddenly blows the woman’s skirts skywards. The woman is momentarily embarrassed, but recovers her composure and laughs; the short then ends. Shot in one long take, the “meaning” of the film – perhaps here its entertainment value – appears to be derived from the relationship of the event to the moment at which it occurs, rather than from its situation within a wider frame of reference (Doane 2002: 181).

<sup>5</sup> This is Doane’s definition of the contingent (Doane 1997: 142). Both she and Vaughan draw implicitly on French post-structuralist theories of the event *per se*, most notably that of Lyotard, who, in his exposition of the concept in relation to the death of the Renault worker Pierre Overney (Lyotard 1994: 151-186), ultimately appears to suggest that “Overney’s death is an event

Yet this immediately presents us with a conundrum: if contingency, or the spontaneous event, is asystematic, how can it be graspable through representation? Can a film-maker incorporate the contingent nature of live shooting into a cinematic project and still make the project meaningful? Vaughan explicitly acknowledges the importance of these tensions when he stresses that the spontaneous pro-filmic event was not simply a source of fascination for early directors, but, due to the challenge it represented to the established codes of representation, also a threat (Vaughan 1999: 6). Their response was to develop new codes that allowed these tensions to be resolved. These were institutionalised through the generation of what we now understand as those practices specific to feature film – editing, narrative, and the idea of spectacle (Doane 2002: 169-170; Gunning 1990: 60-61) – the consequence of which was the evolution of what one might call the *diegetic* event. This was not the uncontrolled interaction of the camera with the pro-filmic characterised by the incommensurability of reality. Instead, it was the shaping of the pro-filmic through editing, such that a sequential or spatial logic was generated within the context of the diegesis. The result was a systematic attempt to reinvest particular instants with more significance than others, thus drawing all moments within the film into a structural, hierarchical relationship with one another (Doane 2002: 144): what one might otherwise call, for example, a “climax”, or a “narrative resolution”. The significant difference is that, in contrast to the actuality’s presentation of the pro-filmic event, the diegetic event gained meaning through reference to other moments in the film that were differentiated on a scale of importance. It was, in other words, an attempt to *reinvest* certain moments with specific significance. As such, it was not the site of contingency, but an attempt to harness or minimise it (Doane 2002: 144). Its emergence heralded the shift away from what Gunning (1990) has called the “cinema of attractions”, which included the actuality film, towards modern feature film. The result is that “film [fell] into place as a signifying system whose articulations [grew] ever more complex”, but one in which “the spontaneous [was] subsumed into the enunciated” (Vaughan 1999: 8).

What this suggests is that a two-fold division lies at the heart of shooting live. On the one hand, there is the encounter between the film-maker and his or her subject that occurs during the process of filming, in which the unexpected pro-filmic event is clearly symptomatic of the contingent nature of material reality. On the other there is the *post facto* attempt of the film-maker to make sense of this encounter, usually in the editing suite, which may result in a formalisation of the unexpected such that its intrinsically contingent nature is diminished. The result is the diegetic event. The former is significant in that it happens at all, and is therefore largely prior to (and thus ironically open to) meaning. The latter has significance invested in it, and therefore comes to take on a very specific meaning within the context of the filmic diegesis.

This is, arguably, a universal problem intrinsic to the nature of film, as Kracauer noted many years ago.<sup>6</sup> I would suggest, however, that this was particularly true of the early

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not because of its causes and effects, but because of its senselessness or *inanity*” (Bennington 2005: 109).

<sup>6</sup> “Any film-maker evolving a narrative is faced with the task of simultaneously living up to two obligations which seem to be difficult to reconcile. On the one hand, he will have to advance the

NDFM, for two reasons. As we have seen, shooting live was an integral part of the new realism that these directors were attempting to develop, and, as per Jia Zhangke's observation, the contingent pro-filmic event was an integral part of this experience. The *xianchang* aesthetic was therefore an essential guarantee of the authenticity of events portrayed on screen, or, as Wu Wenguang suggests, "it [*xianchang*] is the basic quality [*benshen*] of things and people that a producer observes with his or her own eyes in real life" (W. Wu 2001c: 215). Yet the ability to maintain a degree of coherence was equally essential to what quickly became the political goal of the early directors: to trace the consequences of CCP ideological indoctrination at the foundational levels of the social and political system. Material contingency as a guarantor of truth therefore ran the risk of undermining what might be described as the early movement's intellectual project. Practice and political purpose were potentially in tension with one another.

In consequence, the relationship of the early documentary directors to the problem of the contingent pro-filmic event was arguably far more ambiguous than Jia Zhangke allows for. The early NDFM film-makers were famous for developing a form of documentary film practice with a strongly ethnographic bent: this included extensive use of pre-shoot research, interviews, and careful forward planning. Wu Wenguang has described this process with regard to his early films as being like "fieldwork" (W. Wu, interview 2005). This practice betrays quite clearly the conflict with the unexpected at the heart of the *xianchang* aesthetic. Duan Jinchuan, for example, whilst acknowledging the inevitability of change in location shooting – "there will be some discrepancy between what you thought of in advance and the actual process of shooting" (quoted in W. Wang 2000: 132) – emphasizes that this unpredictability can be minimized through proper preparation:

As far as documentary film-makers are concerned, you must also have the vision to be able to see how things will develop; you must plan in advance. Why do I like to shoot films? Because the discrepancy between my understanding of the issues and what I shoot after isn't that great. When conducting research and interviews prior to shooting, I can actually see how certain things are going to pan out; but because during shooting people change, your actual content may change. This happens all the time,

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action by assigning to each shot a meaning relevant to the plot. That this reduction of meanings falls to editing was demonstrated by Kuleshov [...] On the other hand, the film-maker will wish to exhibit and penetrate physical reality for its own sake. This calls for shots not yet stripped of their multiple meanings" (Kracauer 1997: 69). This assumption is usually employed to explain importance of the long take or single shot to neo-realism; it is usually understood as consequent upon a reduction in the need for editing. For example, Serge Daney reads Bazin's criticisms of editing as arising not simply from technical concerns (such as depth of field), but from a desire to see certain kinds of events – particularly those that embody risk – captured in such a way that their intrinsic heterogeneity is brought to the fore. He argues that Bazin favoured the single shot above editing as the formal element most capable of achieving this because it "lets things speak of themselves" (Daney 2003: 33). Editing, by contrast, can tend towards "automatically creating meaning" (Daney 2003: 33), imposing it upon the viewer. This again suggests the ultimately incommensurable relationship between film and reality, one that is sometimes elided through editing technique.

it's inevitable. [So you must have a plan] Otherwise you won't be able to finish your film.

(quoted in W. Wang 2000: 132)

In other words, "ethnographic" preparation can be seen as a practical measure to ensure maximum control over pro-filmic material within the limits established by the *xianchang* aesthetic, thus reducing the element of surprise inherent in location work until it is within limits acceptable to the director.

This potential conflict is downplayed in discussion of the early NDFM. Both the directors, and scholars writing on them, have chosen to emphasise the importance of *xianchang* in generating forms of documentary that allowed for greater audience engagement as a consequence of a necessarily ambiguous aesthetic (see e.g. J Duan quoted in J. Zhu and B. Mei 2004: 130-131). The "public" documentary is seen as part of this process (X. Lü, interview 2005).<sup>7</sup> What I hope to show in the following sections is that, whilst arguably providing greater freedom of interpretation than the classic *zhuantipian*, the "public" documentary did so within a carefully defined semiotic space that suggested specific limits on the possibilities of such exegesis; and therefore that the cinematic form associated with "public" documentary in its purest manifestation can be understood as a partial response to this tension between praxis and politics, and the ambivalent relationship to contingency that is central to this. It is, in other words, a formal corollary to the "ethnographic" film practice mentioned above. This is suggested by the causal model of the event this form presents: a model that, in its purest manifestation, was adapted from the film practice of the American director Frederick Wiseman. In order to explicate these points, I turn to the two documentaries broadly acknowledged as the apogee of the "public" documentary form: Duan Jinchuan's *No.16 Barkhor Street* (1997) and *The Square* (1994), shot by Duan in conjunction with Zhang Yuan.

### **Form and Event in *No.16 Barkhor Street* and *The Square***

*No.16 Barkhor Street* takes as its subject the day-to-day running of a single institution: a *juweihui*, or residents' committee, in a neighbourhood of Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Most of the activity takes place within the environs of a single building, the office out of which the committee – the lowest level of local government in China – operates. In consequence, of all the early "public" documentaries, *Barkhor Street* is the one which most clearly advertises the limits imposed on the pro-filmic event, simply because the issue of social control is indicated as central to the film from the outset. Whilst what we see is in no way staged by the director, much of it is closely monitored by the members of the committee. Nothing, then, is spontaneous if it can be helped; unexpected events are to be avoided at all costs, for they might disturb social stability and threaten national

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<sup>7</sup> In China "public" documentaries are a generic form frequently defined in relation to their subject matter, location of filming, and mode of production. They tackle topics of historical or political significance to society at large, transcending individual significance; consequently, they are often shot in public spaces of some kind, whilst technological limitations ensured that their mode of production was comparatively traditional, usually involving co-operation between more than one individual in a small team.

unity. From the beginning, when a meeting is called to discuss the maintenance of proper social order during celebrations to mark the end of the Tibetan New Year period, through to the finale, when the committee is obliged to help organize celebrations commemorating the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of the Tibetan Autonomous Region – an event so spontaneous that the participants are even instructed what to wear – it is clear that the micro-management of daily processes is a key element of this film.

As a result, there is very little in the way of genuinely unexpected pro-filmic activity in *No.16 Barkhor Street*. The events portrayed – familial and neighbourhood disputes, political education, incidents of theft and delinquency – are far from exceptional to the context in which they occur. Interactions between members of the committee and members of the general public are clearly shaped by the official positions occupied by the former, such that sequences are usually structured in ways that reflect the expectations and responsibilities of the *juweihui*.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, it is precisely this form of social “role playing”, and the muted ethnic tension that it hides, that here constitutes Duan Jinchuan’s object of study; but the result is that whilst none of what we see is staged, very little occurs that exceeds the roles defined for all participants by the institutional space that is the focus of the documentary.

The question arises, however, as to how are these individual sequences are bound together. The pro-filmic events caught by Duan’s camera do not necessarily follow in logical, linear sequence: one thing does not lead inexorably to another; instead, we tend to jump around, sometimes returning to problems, occasionally leaving them unresolved. There is, in other words, no obvious temporal progression connecting these events. True, it is evident that there is a considerable disjuncture between the diegetic and actual time of the film. Over the course of a two hour documentary, we clearly move from winter, signaled by the few establishing shots at the beginning that show snow covering the ground, to late summer or autumn, as demonstrated both by changes in light and weather, and by the committee secretary’s statement that the anniversary celebrations, which conclude the film, are to take place on the first day of September. Yet this time is generally non-specific: it is unclear precisely when most of the events portrayed take place, and ultimately it is unimportant, for their relationship with one another is structured only very loosely by the time periods in which they take place. Instead, these sequences share at least one of two characteristics: they all take place within the immediate environs of the *juweihui*; and they are all implicated in some way with the maintenance of social order. Thus, though each sequence in the film is more-or-less distinct, each represents a different facet of the work of the *juweihui* as a whole. Together they therefore present a more complete and coherent picture of what the institution is and how it operates.

This is marked most clearly in the transitions between sequences that take place inside and outside the *juweihui* office. In practice the environs of the committee would appear

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<sup>8</sup> One of the most obvious of these is the presentation of a problem at the beginning of a scene that is supposed to be resolved by its conclusion, a formula that is very close to Nichols’ characterisation of the “expository” documentary form per se (Nichols 1991: 38).

to include much of Barkhor Street itself, and the documentary features sections that occur both within the actual physical space of the committee building, and elsewhere. However, transitions between such spaces are carefully edited to ensure that a degree of continuity is maintained between what happens inside and outside. One short but telling example, which takes place almost three-quarters of an hour into the film, involves the shift from a meeting in the committee room to a scene set in the local police station (*paichusuo*). The former sequence is a relatively extended one that deals with an old man who, feeling ill-treated by his daughter, wishes to move out of her house; it is the responsibility of the *juweihui* to consider the issue and resolve it in an appropriate manner. This sequence concludes with three shots: two close ups of committee members, one woman and one man, with discussion of the case continuing on the sound track; and then a medium shot of three members, sat diagonally to the camera, looking out of frame (clearly in the direction of the other members sat across the room). A telephone suddenly rings, and all three officials turn their heads up shot, presumably towards the sound. Another official goes to answer; we see a fragment of his body from the back as he enters and leaves the frame whilst crossing the room. The camera then cuts outside. We hear street noise; the frame is focused on a vertical sign hanging on the wall in front of us, which clearly indicates that this is the entrance to the police station; pedestrians pass back and forth in front of the camera. Then we hear the voice of a man, apparently on the telephone. "Hello", he asks, "Is this the Barkhor Street Residents' Committee? Who am I speaking to? Bianba?" We then cut indoors, to a medium shot of a man talking on the phone: "Please have the guards bring over the headman's salary. Please come over now, we're waiting over here". The camera then cuts outside again, to a group of young men standing in line, side by side. The camera pans across slowly from right to left as the voice of the man on the phone is heard, introducing these youths as potential recruits for the police academy. We have now clearly shifted away from the *juweihui* and are firmly established within the space of the *paichusuo*.

This is an exceptionally clever piece of editing. Duan shot *Barkhor Street* on one camera (Voci 2004: 100), so it is in all likelihood physically impossible that he could have simultaneously captured both parties of a single telephone call. Instead, what we have is an "indefinite temporal ellipsis" a moment when continuity between sequences is maintained *despite* disruption of temporal flow (Nichols 1981: 219). This is achieved via a process Bill Nichols has described as "temporal proximity" (Nichols 1981: 220): the placing of logically or analytically related speech or sound before and after a visual cut such that the images appear connected, even though the sound does not actually continue uninterruptedly across them. In other words, the telephone call made to the *juweihui* at the end of the meeting is not the telephone call we hear being made in the police station: Duan has edited two separate takes together in such a way that their proximity suggests continuity. This continuity is therefore not strictly temporal in a linear sense, but is provided by the overlap in activity between these two spaces, in this case the exercise of local government authority. Each sequence may function as a small piece of the overall picture, but they are interlinked such that they are clearly suggestive of the documentary's broader theme: political and ideological control.

Although *No.16 Barkhor Street* is a study of the quotidian, it is not the day-to-day activities of the *juweihui* that actually animate the documentary, but the larger



ideological context in which these events take place. Its pro-filmic activities are contingent in the sense of unplanned, but subordinate to grander intellectual ambitions within the totality of the documentary as a whole. The same is true of *The Square*. Here, the day-to-day activities take place in Tiananmen. As with *Barkhor Street*, a basic temporal structure is maintained: we start in the middle of one day, and continue through the better part of twenty-four hours, concluding in the midst of the next. Yet, again as in *Barkhor Street*, this time-line is not precisely defined. Whilst certain of the events, such as the square's daily flag raising ceremony, are clear markers of temporality, these are exceptional rather than representative of the film as a whole. Indeed, though the directors could have chosen to start and conclude the documentary with such temporally specific moments, the shots that they actually selected – a high angle pan of the square taken from the Forbidden City, and an extended tracking shot of one of the Tiananmen policeman respectively – are chronologically unplaceable.<sup>9</sup> Whilst activities that share characteristics are sometimes grouped together – there is an extended sequence that links skateboarders, cyclists, joggers, old men playing Frisbee and martial arts practitioners, for example – the significance of the events and people whom we encounter over the course of the film is that they all take place in, or adjacent to, the physical space of the square itself. This is the only thing that connects them.

In turn, Tiananmen's particular connotations are made very clear in the film's opening sequence. In a series of twenty four shots, all taken in or immediately outside the police station responsible for monitoring the square, the directors capture an interview conducted with the two senior officers at the station – Commissar Zhen and Chief Liu – by a CCTV camera crew headed by Shi Jian. As Duan and Zhang record the television crew talking to the policemen about the station, their jobs, and their general attitude towards the work, we hear the officers emphasizing how the square sits at the centre of Beijing, and thus that their police station represents both capital and country to locals and foreigners alike:

Tiananmen is our capital's centre. So we can say here the police represent Beijing. They receive people from all over the country. Besides, they represent China, because it's open to tourists, including foreigners [...] So it represents not only the capital, but also China.

Yet they also discuss how it is their responsibility, with a staff of only one hundred, to maintain order in a site that can see upwards of half a million visitors a day. In order to do so, they make clear that they not only disperse among these crowds, but also rely on the support of those who work in and around the square. As Chief Liu says:

Besides, we try to make use of the shops and peddlers. They help us safeguard the square. We often visit the units [*danwei*] in the area, seeking

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<sup>9</sup> This reflects the fact that *The Square* was of course shot over a period of considerably more than twenty-four hours, and the activities that take place are selections from much lengthier footage. Duan Jinchuan originally gained access to Tiananmen when helping out a CCTV crew in a freelance capacity. However, once they had finished up, he and Zhang stayed on for some time, continuing to shoot material for the documentary (J. Duan quoted in J. Zhu and B. Mei 2004: 108).

opinions, knowing tendencies [*sic*]. Then we rely on observation and hunch.

These discussions clearly establish what follows as a meditation both on the power of history, as mediated through Tiananmen, and the exercise of state power in the physical space of the square. The various interactions between the police, camera crew, tourists local and foreign, and miscellaneous street vendors that dominate the majority of the film are thus shaped by, and representative of, the significance of the context in which they occur. Above all, they form a counterpoint to those events the presence of which are suggested by their systematic absence from all discussion: those of June 1989.

This is illustrated by a very short, four shot transition sequence that connects the initial scene in the police station with the rest of the film. The final shot of the film crew interviewing the officers cuts away to the initial shot in this sequence. It is a close-up of Mao's face, or two-thirds of it: a portrait, slightly off-centre, which fills almost half the screen, but framed at either side so that the image is incomplete and almost two-dimensional. The sound of people working can be heard, but it is hard to identify the actual activity. The film then cuts close up to the source of this sound: it is carpenters planing wood. We appear to be in workshop, but where exactly is hard to tell. The camera tilts slowly upwards, to reveal behind the workmen the same portrait of Mao's face that we have seen in shot one. This time, however, we can see that it is framed through an opening in the wall of the workshop. The camera cuts again to a close-up of a carpenter's hands planing, tilting slowly upwards before cutting to the final shot. This is a full shot of the workmen, framed again through an opening in a wall; a smaller segment of the Mao portrait is visible again in the background, thus providing us with the perspective necessary to understand the spatial relationship between the image and the workman. The camera then cuts to the square itself. In the distance we can see the façade of the Forbidden City, hung with its now barely visible image of the Great Helmsman.

This sequence is unusual, almost unsettling. It bears no obvious causal or temporal relationship to either the scene that precedes it, or that which follows. When and where it occurs is not immediately clear. Its significance, I would suggest, is simply that it allows the directors to introduce the image of Mao, an image that reoccurs throughout the film, functioning as a point of visual reference in a documentary that has no clear characters or "storyline".<sup>10</sup> The nature of the activity we see depicted in this brief scene is essentially unimportant: what *is* important is that it takes place under the watchful eyes of the Chairman somewhere in the proximity of Tiananmen Square, thus hinting at the centrality of ideology and politics to the overall theme of the film. Yet what is most interesting is that through a series of spatial re-framings that invert the classical relationship between an establishing shot (which here comes last, as opposed to first) and a close-up (which here comes first, as opposed to last), Zhang and Duan edit this

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<sup>10</sup> Mao's Tiananmen portrait recurs as the dominant focus of at least six shots over the course of the film, and appears in the background of countless more. In addition, the film includes footage of the police chief discussing his time as a Maoist Red Guard with the CCTV crew outside in the square.

sequence in a manner that mirrors the structure of the entire documentary. We start with a detail; we finish with an overall picture; and the two are connected through spatial proximity. The form of the documentary *as a whole* – one in which individual, internally coherent sequences are edited such that they build up a broader picture of the documentary's subject matter – is thus replicated over the course of this one short scene.

As I hope to have demonstrated, these documentaries display complex formal structures that derive not from temporal but spatial relations. Their sequences are not indicative of a linear causality in the way that, for example, Nichols' proposes is the case for the "expository" documentary.<sup>11</sup> Instead, we are faced with individual, internally coherent scenes that appear to be linked associatively through the spaces in which they occur, and by broader, more abstract issues of which they are suggestive. These individual sequences are then edited in such a way that together they provide a more complete picture of the themes that, individually, they indirectly hint at. Nichols has christened this particular documentary structure "metaphoric" or "mosaic" (Nichols 1981: 234, 211); its practitioner extraordinaire, from whom the early NDFM directors borrowed this form, is the American documentary film-maker Frederick Wiseman.

### **"Public" Documentary and the Metaphorical Mode: The Influence of Frederick Wiseman**

Frederick Wiseman is one of America's most prominent directors of documentary, a man who, along with his contemporaries the Maysles brothers, Don Pennebaker and Richard Leacock, helped establish the American direct cinema tradition of the 1960s. This tradition emerged in the wake of specific technological developments – most obviously the disaggregation of camera, microphones and tape recorder – that enabled synchronised sound shoots for the first time (Barnouw 1993: 235). Its films were among the first to exploit the possibilities provided by such developments, notably shooting in "real time": these directors thus deployed techniques such as long takes, synch sound, and indirect speech to try and capture the flow of lived experience, in the process minimizing their onscreen presence and developing a genre noted for the unpredictability and ambiguity of its style and content (Nichols 1991: 39; Barnouw 1993: 238). In doing so, they tried to move the documentary away from a self-consciously didactic mode towards one that could illuminate the experience of ordinary individuals (Winston 1995: 151). Wiseman was particularly significant in this respect, for from the very beginning his films eschewed the grand political topics of, for example, Leacock's *Primary* (1960), in favour of studies of the day-to-day operation of institutions, and the people involved with them.<sup>12</sup> His work is thus formally distinct from the "expository mode" of documentary that was popular prior to the 1960s. Instead, it sets out to depict the organization of the everyday within particular social institutions and formations,

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<sup>11</sup> Nichols suggests the "expository" mode takes as its formal premise the posing of a problem followed by its solution (Nichols 1991: 38).

<sup>12</sup> The titles of his films – *Hospital*, *High School*, *Zoo*, *Central Park* – give a clear indication of the director's preferred subjects and *modus operandi*, whilst his most famous, and controversial, film, *Titicut Follies*, was literally about the workings of a (mental) institution.

presenting us with unremarkable events that appear to reflect the nature of daily existence (Nichols 1991: 38-42).

Wiseman's influence on the pioneers of the NDFM is widely recognized. Wu Wenguang has written extensively about the impact of the director on his understanding of documentary (see e.g. W. Wu 2001b, 2001d, 2001e). Both Berry and Voci have commented on his influence on Duan Jinchuan's early works, ranging from the latter's elimination of the formally arranged "talking heads" interviews that had characterised earlier NDFM documentaries such as *Bumming in Beijing* and *1966: My Time in the Red Guards* (1993); the exclusive use of natural sound; the minimising of the on-camera presence of the filmmakers wherever possible; to the use of the "mosaic" structure in *Barkhor Street* (Berry 2002: 126; Voci 2004: 99-100). Duan himself has also talked of being the Chinese documentarian most heavily influenced by Wiseman (J. Duan, interview 2005). Yet this influence on is usually explained in three ways. The first is simply exposure. Wiseman's films were some of the first foreign documentaries viewed by the early NDFM directors, initially at the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival in the early 1990s.<sup>13</sup> This was a period when, Duan argues, Chinese directors were still searching for a visual language through which to express their ideas (J. Duan, interview 2005): the films they saw at Yamagata demonstrated both precedents for the work they were doing in China, and a variety of different approaches to the shooting of documentary film. Secondly, Wiseman's interest in the day-to-day operation of social and political institutions, simultaneously quotidian and *engagé*, appealed to the political and intellectual commitments of the first wave of directors. Thus, Berry and Voci both appear to locate Duan's use of the "metaphorical" or "mosaic" technique in relation to the director's interest in the analysis of political and social institutions, and the desire to break with pre-Tiananmen conventions and the intellectual positions associated with them. Lastly, and paradoxically, the *indirectness* of direct cinema – for example, its avoidance of direct commentary, voice-over, or subtitles – carried its own particular attractions, and has generally been understood to encourage a greater engagement with the material on the part of the audience.<sup>14</sup> Yet such indirectness also provided space for directors to work within the immediate post-Tiananmen environment, one which was hardly welcoming to politically motivated art. As Shi Jian has noted, one of the reasons that so many Chinese film-makers turned simultaneously to the documentary form in the early 1990s was because "it clearly did not have explicit signification, but was reliant on the appearance of the image for its meaning" (quoted in X. Lü 2003: 152).

Wiseman's influence on the evolution of the "public" documentary is thus usually understood in relation to subject matter and mode of audience address. Yet one significant facet of Wiseman's formal style that scholars of Chinese documentary have

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<sup>13</sup> Wu Wenguang first saw a Wiseman film at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival in 1993 (W. Wu 2001d: 11). This was the year that Duan also attended the festival for the first time, and he saw Wiseman's *Zoo* in the international competition (J. Duan, interview 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Duan has commented that he saw its lack of didacticism as encouraging a sceptical approach in the audience, forcing individual members to engage with, and draw their own conclusions about, the film. This in turn was a remedy for the ideological and intellectual calcification from which the directors considered local audiences to be suffering (quoted in J. Zhu and B. Mei 2004: 130-131).

failed to comment on is his statement that his films present “a theory about the event, about the subject of the film” (Nichols 1981: 209); in other words, that they offer a particular model of causality. The pro-filmic activities that we see in a Wiseman documentary are significant because of what they tell us about the institutional or social space in which they occur. They are not absolutely contingent, in the sense of happening purely by chance. Instead, they are usually understood as the consequence of the limits placed upon such contingency by the context in which they take place. Wiseman is interested not so much in the apparent randomness of the quotidian, but in how it becomes *routinised* – less contingent, more predictable – in specific circumstances.

Formally, Wiseman’s indirect mode is directly implicated in the way propositions about the pro-filmic are advanced. This is because the relationship between individual sequences in a Wiseman documentary is not one of linear causality, but of spatial co-existence (Nichols 1981: 211-212). In a standard model of causality, B would follow A because the latter is responsible for initiating the former. In a Wiseman film, B follows A not because the latter has necessarily brought about the former, but because both are a product of the multiple relationships between events and individuals that are ultimately shaped by the shared socio-institutional space in which they are formed (Nichols 1981: 217). Arguably, the ultimate causal factor must therefore be understood as this space. Each scene, though internally coherent, is thus intended to help us build up an overall picture of the latter, whether it be a hospital, school, or mental institution, and demonstrate how it operates. It is for this reason that Nichols christened Wiseman’s aesthetic as “metaphoric” or “mosaic”, in the sense that “each sequence [conveys] a recognisable aspect of the [film’s] overall design” (Nichols 1981: 211).

Wiseman’s style may encourage speculation as to the “meaning” of what happens on screen, in the sense that the lack of linear causality makes us think harder about the relationship between what we are seeing and what we have just seen; however, it does so within a carefully delimited diegetic space.<sup>15</sup> In effect, Wiseman is using editing techniques to structure and imbue the pro-filmic with specific meaning. This does not imply that what we see in a Wiseman film is any less contingent in the sense of being set up; rather, his pro-filmic events are edited such that they are drawn into an overall relationship within the diegesis that reflects the director’s understanding of why they happen. In this sense, their semiotic contingency is diminished, for each takes on a specific significance in relation to the film’s overall theme: the hierarchisation that Doane insists is antithetical to the true nature of contingency. Wiseman’s indirect, mosaic style is more than simply an attempt at generating a sense of lived experience, or suggesting how an institution may function. It is symptomatic of a desire to balance the inherent ambiguity and unpredictability of shooting live with a sense of the complex social forces that he clearly believed structure such apparent unpredictability, and which are made

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<sup>15</sup> The possibility of such speculation, as suggested by Duan Jinchuan, seems in practice to be tied to this metaphorical structure. For example, Benson and Anderson, writing on Wiseman’s *Basic Training*, suggest that the film’s structure is as much retrospective as consecutive, “each scene helping us to make sense of what we have seen before, but not seemingly to oblige the film-maker to any particular scene in what follows” (Benson and Anderson 1989: 179). The lack of a linear causality thus makes us think harder about the relationship between what we are seeing and what we have just seen, a mode that Nichols describes as “associative” (Nichols 1981: 234).

manifest through real events. The consequence, however, is that the incommensurability of the pro-filmic is ultimately subordinated to the grander intellectual ambitions of the documentary diegesis, thus imposing broad limitations upon the possible interpretations of the former.

This, I would argue, is precisely what we see at work in the “public” documentary genre, as exemplified by both *No.16 Barkhor Street* and *The Square*. For sure, Duan’s commitment to the *xianchang* aesthetic ensures that the events captured on camera are unscripted, and his deployment of observational techniques results in films that are far less obviously didactic than those of the *zhuantipian*. Nevertheless, these films are far from being a simple “slice of life”, but are edited into a complex structure that imbues each individual section with significance within the context of the overall diegesis.<sup>16</sup> In doing so, the films reduce the absolute contingency of the pro-filmic by introducing a structural formalisation that is clearly intended to convey directorial understanding of the routinisation of social interactions – most obviously via the conformity to professional roles or through the influence of historical and ideological conditioning – in the spaces and institutions that constitute the foci of these films. Thus, we arguably see a transformation of the pro-filmic event, symptomatic of the contingency of real life encounters, into the diegetic event, in which that contingency has been reduced to bring a semiotic coherence to the documentary as a whole. In consequence, I think it is fair to say that the former plays a comparatively small part in the overall formal structure of the “public” documentary. Instead, it is subordinated to the latter, and the desire to convey, within limits, a particular understanding of political and historical causation. In a sense, whilst the principles of *xianchang* ensured that the early NDFM directors abdicated a degree of control over the pro-filmic whilst on location, the formal qualities of the “public” documentary allowed them to re-assert that control from the editing suite.

That these directors understood their work in this manner is ironically underscored by the ways in which “public” documentary *diverges* from Wiseman’s model. Wiseman’s films may be organised metaphorically, and his work political in the sense that it documents the organisation and institutionalisation of American living, but his locations are rarely endowed with any immediate historical or symbolic significance. In contrast, the metaphorical inclinations of the early NDFM films are often made explicit through the directors’ choice of location and subject. This is particularly true of *The Square* and *Barkhor Street*, as even Duan himself acknowledges (J. Duan, interview 2005). *The Square* is in fact a remake of Wiseman’s *Central Park*, a film that Duan and Zhang saw before they set out to make their own (J. Duan, interview 2005). But whereas Central Park has no specific socio-political resonance in an American context, Tiananmen has a cultural importance for Chinese that stretches back to at least the early twentieth century. It is, as Wu Hung notes, “an architectural site that provides a locus of coalescence for political expression, collective memory, identity and history” (H. Wu 2005: 16). Barkhor Street, in turn, is one of the oldest and most culturally significant streets in Lhasa. It was also the epicentre of the political unrest that broke out in the city in October 1987 (J. Duan quoted

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<sup>16</sup> As Berry notes of *Barkhor Street*, it is dependent on editing to bring the material into a coherent whole (Berry 2002: 126).

in X. Lü 2003: 73), and which, as subsequently in Beijing, the Chinese government forcibly suppressed. Whilst the place occupied by the street in the history of inter-ethnic conflict in Tibet is obviously underscored by the film, the presence of *juweihui* in neighbourhoods throughout China, not to mention certain similarities between the events of October 1987 and those of June 1989, endows the film with a significance beyond its immediate context. Although it clearly draws on the specificity of the Tibetan experience, it can therefore also be understood as a commentary on the operation of government institutions throughout China. It is in this “duality” that Duan locates the film’s “universality” (quoted in X. Lü 2003: 75).

Secondly, and equally importantly, the directors tend to talk of their work in far more explicit metaphorical or allegorical terms than Wiseman does. Wu Wenguang illustrates this clearly in discussion of his documentary *Jianghu: Life on the Road*, about a Big Top and its travelling company of players. *Jianghu*, he insists, should not be understood as a film that is merely about the experience of “other people”, namely those without urban residency, who effectively constitute the subjects of the documentary. Rather, it should be understood as a film about everyone in China, urban or rural: now everyone’s life is “on the road”, in a constant state of flux in which the old rules no longer apply, and the new ones have yet to be created (quoted in W. Wang 2000: 108; quoted in X. Lü 2003: 14-15). Through these people, who form a new and distinct social strata that lies somewhere between that of the migrant worker and the farmer, one can analyse broader social change (quoted in X. Lü 2003: 12-13). The metaphorical or allegorical mode thus becomes the form through which the relationship between daily life and more abstract socio-political issues can be traced in a concrete manner, imbuing both with meaning. As Duan Jinchuan has said, without such metaphors to connect these sites to everyday activity, shooting them becomes a meaningless activity (J. Duan, interview 2005).

As I hope to have demonstrated, viewing the “public” documentary as a form that evolved from a particular intellectual affiliation is to overlook its significance as a negotiation between the practice of *xianchang* and the politics of the early NDFM directors. Whilst a commitment to the contingent nature of shooting live was essential to the new form of realism espoused by these film-makers, maintaining a high degree of diegetic coherence was also key to their intellectual and political goals. From this angle, the attraction of Wiseman’s direct cinema technique was that, whilst an obvious product of location shooting, its emphasis on editing as a means to a formally coherent whole allowed a balance to be struck between the pro-filmic and the diegetic, although a balance arguably in favour of the latter. The consequence, however, was a structure in which the contingent pro-filmic event actually has limited overall significance, being instead subordinated in importance to a spatial and ultimately metaphorical logic within the context of the overall diegesis. This is further emphasized by the terms in which the directors describe their films, and the function they see them as serving. This function commits documentary to a metaphorical mode because of its aspirations, at some level, to universality, which in turn divorces it somewhat from the contingent in its various manifestations. What the second half of this chapter addresses is how this understanding of documentary differs in contemporary work, with tensions between the pro-filmic and diegetic having shifted in favour of the former. The consequence is not merely the emergence of the so-called “private” documentary genre, but a whole new

conceptualization of documentary as understood in relation to the question of the contingent event.

### **“Private” Documentary and the Rejection of Metaphor**

That the relationship of the “private” documentary to contingency is very different from that of the “public” form should perhaps be unsurprising: in many ways the latter consciously defines itself, and is defined against, the ethos of the former. “Private” documentaries are seen to concern themselves with topics quite distinct from those that preoccupied the early documentary directors, focusing on individual, sometimes even autobiographical, emotional experiences; the familial, such as issues concerning one’s parents or one’s marriage; and internal domestic spaces, as opposed to external public ones. In addition, these films frequently include scenes of a highly private or sensitive nature, such as sexual relations or physical self-harm.<sup>17</sup> The directors who work within the genre are understood to be less interested in socially or politically engaged film-making than in addressing personal issues and expressing a personal point of view. Here, for example, is the film-maker Hu Xinyu, on his film *The Man*, which has been described as the first full-length “private” documentary (X. Zhang, interview 2005):

Because I lack the ability to get by socially, I basically don’t care about society. I can only circle round my own tiny world and the people in it. I also think that looking after myself and shooting myself well is better than being concerned with society and politics; it’s better for me to sort myself and my own immediate issues out.

(X. Hu 2005: 4)

Documentary, in this formulation, has moved away from concerns about the formation of public life, and has instead become a mode of introspection, concerned solely with the fate of the individual. In consequence, the need to imbue the documentary image with overarching significance no longer seems necessary, or even desirable.

Chinese scholars frequently relate the emergence of this genre to the age and social background of its directors. As a new generation of directors came to adulthood after *gaige kaifang*, so the rise and fall of the 1980s “Culture Fever” and its associated values became ever less of a defining experience in their work. Some (e.g. X. Zhang, interview 2005) suggest that this younger generation have deliberately rejected those topics (particularly the national and the ethnic) which they have seen to have caused individuals who lived through the 1980s so much pain and trouble. Others (e.g. X. Lü,

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<sup>17</sup> Examples might include Wang Fen’s *Unhappiness Does Not Stop At One* (2001), about her parent’s relationship; Yang Lina’s *Home Video* (2001) also about her family; Zuo Yixiao’s *Losing* (2005), which is focused on his divorce; or Wu Wenguang’s *Fuck Cinema!* (2004) which follows one man in his quest to get his film script produced in Beijing. Hu Xinyu’s *The Man* (2005) is shot almost entirely in the director’s single-bedroom flat in Taiyuan, rarely straying outside the room. Zhang Ming’s *Springtime in Wushan* (2003) includes a scene of full-frontal female nudity; Hu Shu’s *Leave Me Alone* (2001) features one in which a bar girl stubs out cigarettes on her arms; whilst Huang Weikai’s *Floating* (2005) includes a scene of attempted suicide on the part of the protagonist’s ex-girlfriend.



roundtable 2005) see it as a consequence of their position in a society that has already become commercialised, where politics has clearly been subordinated to economics, its trajectory “fixed” in place. Yet the point of view articulated by Hu Xinyu is more than simply a rejection of the social: it is in effect a comprehensive refutation of the “metaphorical” mode and the possibility of universal signification of the kind ascribed to by the early documentary makers. Hu makes this abundantly clear in discussion of the final scene of his film *The Man*. Whilst the majority of this documentary chronicles the trials and tribulations of three male friends who share a small bed-sit in Taiyuan, provincial capital of Shanxi province, the final scene of the film is a single, long shot of a mouse dying on the floor of their room. It has been shot by Shi, one of the three, and, whilst he has been shown engaging in this activity both inside and outside the flat at various points during the film, as a conclusion the significance of this image is hard to decipher. What relationship does it bear to the rest of the film? The obvious answer would be that it is in some way metaphorical or symbolic of the film’s themes, as would be the case in the early “public” documentaries. Yet Hu Xinyu rejects this interpretation absolutely: “It’s [this shot] not a metaphor. Poetry rejects metaphor: so too does documentary” (Z. Cui 2005). In this understanding of documentary, an event takes on no significance in relation to the broader picture: it signifies only in and of itself. It is, in other words, singular and particular, with no wider significance. This point is made even more forcefully by the director Yu Jian, commenting on audience response to documentary films screened at the second Yunnan Multi Culture Visual Festival in Kunming, 2005. Why, he enquired, was every work, every character in a documentary expected to be “meaningful”? Everyone seemed to think of themselves as a potential intellectual, always wanting to know “why”: “There is no why, it’s just like that. It is – that’s enough” (J. Yu 2005: 6). Interpretation in a documentary context is thus a meaningless exercise: the events portrayed speak for, and only for, themselves.

Yu Jian’s commentary displays the unmistakable characteristics of contemporary Chinese anti-intellectualism, combined with a certain nostalgia for a prelapsarian cultural moment before people were forced to confront difficult existential questions.<sup>18</sup> Yet both directors, in insisting on the unsuitability of metaphor and interpretation as models for understanding what documentary does, seem to be shifting towards a framework in which the pro-filmic event is seen as absolutely contingent in the semiotic sense. By this I mean contingent in the sense outlined at the beginning of this chapter, in relation to both Doane and Vaughan’s interpretation of the term: in other words, that it is inassimilable to wider or systematic meaning. In *The Man*, the death of a mouse is simply the death of a mouse. The image derives its resonance less from a framework of broader symbolic significance, than from its place within the daily routine of the three main characters.

What this appears to suggest is a subtle readjustment of the relationship between the intra- and extra-diegetic, between pro-filmic and semiotic contingency. In the “public” documentary, the significance of such an event would have been flagged by its position relative to the rest of the diegesis; a position confirmed on some level by the manner in

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<sup>18</sup> Yu claims that in the China of the past, people did not concern themselves with such “Hamlet-esque problems” (*hamuleiteshi wenti*), for living itself was meaning enough (J. Yu 2005: 6).

which this particular moment was edited. That this is *lacking* in *The Man* is implied by the very question posed by Hu's interviewer as to the meaning of the image. Hu's response, in turn, points to a reaction against the shaping of the pro-filmic that is central to the formal pre-dispositions of the early NDC directors, and an increasing emphasis on the importance of such material, and its inherent contingency, in and of its own right. Yet is this more than simply rhetoric? My contention is that it is not; and that this is demonstrated by the extent to which "private" documentaries have incorporated the pro-filmic event not merely as a signifier of their authenticity, but as a fundamental part of their formal architecture. If the early film-makers subordinated the contingent event to the significance of the space in which it occurred, as articulated through editing, recent Chinese documentary has integrated it such that it plays a far more significant part in the development of any individual film. Two documentaries that illustrate this point clearly are Zhang Ming's *Springtime in Wushan* (2003), and Huang Weikai's *Floating* (2005).

### **The Contingent Event and the "Private" Documentary: *Springtime in Wushan* and *Floating***

*Springtime in Wushan* commences as a personal take on an established genre. Director Zhang Ming and his friend Zheng Jinzhong are traveling back to their old hometown, Wushan, to spend the Chinese New Year with their families. This year, however, is slightly different: the old town, which stands on the site of the Three Gorges Dam project, is about to be submerged by the rising waters of the Yangtze, and all its residents have all been moved to purpose-built replacement quarters further up the valley. The holiday will therefore be the first that people have spent in the new town, and, in order to record the experience, Zhang and Zheng have returned with a digital video camera. Long resident in other parts of China, they both identify with, and yet feel slightly alienated from, the "new" Wushan. As Zheng jokes at the very beginning of the documentary: "We return to our home town as tourists".

*Springtime* thus shares a similar preoccupation with much early "public" documentary film: the impact that rapid urbanization and industrialization is having on Chinese society, and a desire to record said impact before it has become naturalized. Of course, it does so from a highly personal vantage point, for the director is in some way still a part of the community that he is filming. As such, *Springtime* features one of the stylistic rhetorical twists characteristic of the "private" documentary form as a whole: the acknowledgment of the director's presence, visually and/or aurally, on camera. Zhang's presence is never occluded: rather, in interactions with both family and friends, in particular Zheng, who almost takes the role of his on-camera "alter ego", his presence is registered through conversation and commentary. Nevertheless, the film's opening scenes are all, in a sense, simultaneous attempts to locate those traces of the past that still remain in Wushan and environs, whilst exploring what effect such a momentous upheaval has had on the social fabric of the town, as experienced through the life of Zhang's friends and relatives. The initial scene, in which Zhang and Zheng take a taxi down to the ruins of the old town and wander around the rubble, endeavouring to locate old architectural landmarks amidst a landscape in which, as Zheng said, "everything's changed", is the most obvious in this regard. It quite explicitly evokes the

recent past and the personal memories and emotions invested in the remnants of place that surround the two men. The subsequent sequence, which shadows Zhang, Zheng and some old friends from a tea house in the new town and through a tour of the city's nightlife, is not simply an opportunity for the men to catch up, but also for both director and audience to take stock of the social violence wrought by the enforced re-location of the community, and the rapid commercialization that appears to have accompanied it. The plastic coconut palm street lighting that adorns the main drag; the omnipresent karaoke bars, and the girls that do or don't frequent them (as one friend comments, "What are we doing here since they're [the prostitutes] all gone? Where's the fun in that?"); the hotel that Zheng vetoes as a place to go and drink tea because it's frequented by the new Wuhan bourgeoisie (*baofahu*), who make him feel awkward (*gangga*); all these images and incidents are part of this particular story. Finally, in the sequence that follows this, we accompany the director and his father round the new town the next day, taking shots of buildings whilst the old man explains their function in the new urban landscape: elementary school, department store, "European-style" (i.e. modern and expensive) housing. Thus is the old town that Zhang went searching for in the opening sequence resurrected, both for him, and for the audience.

It could have been perfectly possible for this structure – three interlocking strands exploring the same theme from three slightly different yet necessarily connected perspectives – to have been developed indefinitely for the course of the documentary. However, in the following scene, reminiscent of Zhang Xiaping's nervous breakdown in *Bumming in Beijing*, we are exposed to something entirely unexpected and unpredictable. This scene involves Zhang and his friends, and occurs in the "Love in the Snow" tea house where they were initially reunited in the film's second extended sequence. The men sit around a low table, playing poker and drinking tea. Then one of Zhang's friends, Qi Heping, a widower, makes a telephone call to the sister of his girlfriend: he wants to know why he hasn't heard from her over the New Year. Slowly, as the conversation unfolds, we gather from Qi's questions and responses to his interlocutor the reason for the girlfriend's lack of communication: she has been jailed for brawling. The phone call ends. No one stops playing cards; one of the group says: "I don't think it's just about a fight – maybe there are other reasons". And Qi picks up the phone once more, initiating a series of phone calls – to the town's Assistant Prosecutor, to a friend of his in the Public Security Bureau – in an attempt to discover what exactly these reasons might be.

Throughout this scene, Zhang keeps the camera fixed on his friends in an unflinchingly long shot. As with Wu's shot of Zhang Xiaping, it seems as if both he and the other men are unsure what to do. No one is clear precisely what is happening: the measured, deliberate way in which all those present in the room besides Qi continue with their card game during his telephone calls suggests that, contrary to appearances, they, like the audience, are listening extremely carefully, attempting to ascertain the precise nature of the conversation. In the end, Zhang's nervous breakdown is merely one scene of many, its significance absorbed into *Bumming in Beijing*'s broader thematic sweep: Qi's news, in contrast, takes on a life of its own. Yet this is not achieved through thematic editing, as might have been the case in a Duan Jinchuan film. Instead, the entire strand of the documentary exploring Zhang and Zheng's relationship with their friends gradually

refocuses on Qi's efforts to unravel the circumstances behind his girlfriend's incarceration; locate her; and, ultimately, visit her over the holiday period. This is not achieved artificially; Zhang merely tracks events as they develop naturally over the coming days. The result is a highly charged story-line which combines intensely personal issues concerning Qi's relationship with an unprecedentedly graphic demonstration of how to work the Chinese penal system in a provincial city context. A documentary that started out as a more-or-less personal meditation on urban social change metamorphoses into something rather richer and more complex.

Unlike *Springtime in Wushan*, *Floating* is set in urban China proper. It follows Yang Jiwei, a thirty-something busker from the province of Henan, as he attempts to make a precarious and quasi-legal living in Guangzhou, in the Pearl River Delta. Huang Weikai, the director, tracks eight months in Yang's life, covering his personal relationships and professional tribulations, which culminate in his arrest and expulsion from the city at the hands of the Guangzhou police. Arguably, *Floating* therefore engages with a number of themes characteristic of "public" documentary: the life of the artist, explored so comprehensively by Wu Wenguang in *Bumming in Beijing* and *At Home in the World* (1995); the social environment of the Chinese underclass, exemplified by films such as Zhu Chuanming's *Beijing Cotton Fluffer* (1999) and Du Haibin's *Along the Railroad* (2000); and the interaction of ordinary people with government institutions at a local level, as discussed previously in relation to *No.16 Barkhor Street*. Yet Huang suffuses this subject matter with a far more personal hue. Unlike Duan's films, *Floating* is clearly shot from the perspective of one individual's experience; there is no attempt to make institutional operation a primary "character" in the evolution of the documentary. Instead, we get to see and hear scenes of great intimacy: the suicide attempt by Yang's first girlfriend, Peach, and his trip with her to the local hospital to pump her stomach; his second girlfriend Haixia's abortion, and the impact it has on their budding relationship; how he feels about his teenage love, Lijun, who still lives in his hometown back in Henan. And, in contrast to Wu's protagonists, Huang's are not agonised intellectuals with avant-garde affiliations, trying to realise their utopian ambitions either at home or overseas. Instead, Yang and his friends are struggling to get by in a thoroughly materialistic environment, the values of which they simultaneously endorse, and yet are denigrated by. To quote Yang: "I'm nothing. I've no money [...] I'm nobody. I'm almost thirty and I don't own a thing".

In a sense, *Floating* displays aspects of both documentary forms, holding them in tension throughout the course of the film.<sup>19</sup> However, much of its potential power as a public, political work derives from its denouement. Unlike Zhang Ming, Huang Weikai saves his unexpected pro-filmic event until the very end of the documentary. In the final sequence, we discover that Yang Jiwei has been unexpectedly arrested by the police, who determine that his temporary residence card has expired, and transport him to the Shahe Detention and Repatriation Centre. What follows is a desperate twelve-hour struggle as Haixia and Huang struggle to find enough money to bail the busker out, and then deliver it to him in person. Arriving at Shahe the morning after Yang's

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<sup>19</sup> Zhang Xianmin described the film to me as one which incorporated aspects of both the private and the public (X. Zhang, interview 2005).

incarceration, Huang waits outside the gates for the bus that will transport his friend to the railway station, and thence onto a train headed for Henan. In an extraordinary sequence, he physically tails the vehicle across Guangzhou, first on foot, then in a taxi (the responsibility of an uncharacteristically law-abiding taxi driver, who, on being urged by Huang to drive as fast as possible, responds: "Safety first – you think this is a police car?"), and then finally on foot again, ultimately catching up with the bus as it lies stranded in a traffic jam. In an inconclusive shot, we hear the director shouting that Yang should use the money to bail himself out on the train, and watch the bus as it disappears into the distance. Whether Huang has actually managed to pass any money over is unclear. Finally, the camera cuts to a scene of passing countryside, apparently shot from a moving train, with Yang singing over the soundtrack. Intertitles inform us that the same month Yang was repatriated, Sun Zhigang, a university graduate, was beaten to death in a Guangzhou detention centre after being arrested for not carrying his Temporary Residence Permit. Three months later, the State Council abolished the detention system.

By concluding *Floating* with a direct reference to such a high profile case of official misconduct, the director has clearly taken a conscious decision to end on a political note. Yet the power of this statement clearly derives from its positioning after the film's finale, itself an uncanny, although obviously less fatal, parallel of the Sun incident. This is underlined by the fact that Huang chooses to reverse the film's chronological development in order to close with Yang's detention: although the film is structured retrospectively, starting in January 2003 and moving slowly back in time to August 2002, this final sequence is dated March 2003. Ironically, the director makes use of editing to reverse narrative flow, undercutting any sense that we may be "building" towards a climax; the final scene is therefore even more surprising. The overtly *verité* nature of the entire bus chase sequence, replete as it is with flailing, unfocused camera work, further focuses our attention on the genuinely contingent nature of the incident: its dramatic tension derives precisely from the fact that its outcome is as unclear to us now as it must have to been to Huang at the time. Thus, a rapid series of unpredictable events refocuses what has until now been a story told from a personal point of view, allowing a more broadly political statement to emerge. One might argue that consequent upon such a politics, *Floating* qualifies as a "public" documentary. If this is the case, however, the extent to which it incorporates elements characteristic of the "private" genre must also be acknowledged.

Is this anything more than the re-emergence of narrative? Neither *Spring in Wushan* nor *Floating* is predominantly focused on any single contained space, be that public or private: instead they mingle the two. Both feature temporality far more explicitly than *The Square* or *No.16 Barkhor Street*; the former as a consequence of playing out over a limited time frame, namely Chinese New Year; the latter because it marks the movements between temporal periods, even as the progress backwards. Given that the "private" documentary defines itself so self-consciously against its predecessors, perhaps this should be no surprise. Yet I would argue that it goes further, and is more complex, than being simply a reaction against the practices of the "public" documentary form; for, as the case of *Floating* has already suggested, the ability to categorise genres

based on such distinctions is becoming increasingly difficult. Nothing better illustrates this than the case of Wang Bing's *West of the Tracks* (2003).

### **The Contingent Event and *West of the Tracks***

Whether or not one agrees with Lu Xinyu's judgment that "it [...] must be ranked among the most extraordinary achievements of world cinema in the new century" (X. Lü 2005: 126), *West of the Tracks* is indisputably the *magnum opus* of the NDFM. Nine hours long, tripartite in structure, upon release it took both the domestic and international documentary scene by storm, garnering festival awards and critical acclaim across Asia, Europe and North America. This was all the more extraordinary given that director Wang Bing was a novice film-maker. Upon graduating from the photography department of the Beijing Film Academy, and having saved a little money, he decided to return to Shenyang, where he had trained as an undergraduate, with the goal of shooting a feature film. In late 1999, dispirited and impoverished, he rented a DV camera and began instead to work on a documentary. Two years and 300 hours of footage later, he had the basis for *West of the Tracks* (Y. Zhang 2005).

The focus of Wang's film is the massive Tiexi industrial complex of the title. A district of Shenyang, a city in China's old industrial north-east, Tiexi was for fifty years China's oldest and largest industrial base: "a fortress of the socialist planned economy [...] that served as an engine of socialist modernisation for the country as a whole" (X. Lü 2005: 125). Its factory buildings – in particular the Shenyang Foundry, with its distinctive three chimneys – were, as the director points out, virtually iconic of the whole region (B. Wang quoted in Y. Zhang 2005). Yet in the Reform Era, as the focus of the domestic economy shifted south to the Pearl River and the Yangtze Delta, so Tiexi began to suffer the inevitable consequences of creeping de-industrialisation: bankruptcies, rising unemployment, social disturbance. It is precisely this process that Wang Bing managed to capture on film. In the first part of the documentary, *Rust*, he tracks the decline and closure of three major factories in the district: the Foundry; the Electric Cable Factory; and the Shenyang Steel Rolling Mill. In the second, *Remnants*, Wang records the impact that these closures have on the neighbourhood where the factory workers and their families live, recording the destruction of their homes as the land is appropriated for commercial development and the residents scattered across the city. Finally, in the third section, *Rails*, the directors turns his camera on a father and son, two itinerants who make a living salvaging or stealing scrap metal and coal from the trains that wind through Tiexi's heart. Over the course of this section, the father is arrested for stealing, and sent to a detention centre; the son, in desperation, tries to locate him; finally, the old man is released, and the two are reunited, returning to their little shack by the side of the railway.

Critical commentary has tended to frame *West of the Tracks* in terms derived more obviously from the "public" than the "private" tradition. Zhang Yaxuan has argued that the entire documentary develops less via incidents and characters than in relation to time and space (X. Zhang and Y. Zhang 2003: 155). Lü Xinyu notes how *Rust* is strictly structured round factory routines and working times: as we move from factory to factory, through the different stages of smelting, electrolysis, and refining, a narrative

emerges that takes as its subject the process of production itself (X. Lü 2005: 128-129). In tracing the eclipse of this process through the historical icons of the factories and those that work in them, she posits that the directors in effect captures “the death of an entire social world [that of Chinese socialism], together with all the hopes and ideals that created it” (X. Lü 2005: 127). And it is also true that Wang has described his aims in not dissimilar terms, talking of his desire to portray a mainstream Chinese working-class lifestyle with some degree of authenticity (quoted in X. Zhang and Y. Zhang 2003: 155). Nevertheless, *West of the Tracks* diverges quite significantly from more classic “public” documentary in a number of ways. Firstly, Wang shot and edited it single-handedly. Secondly, whilst the tone of *Rust* and *Remnants* may be “austerely impersonal”, even Lu acknowledges that this changes during the film’s final segment (X. Lü 2005: 135). By introducing the figures of the old man and his son, the director manages to ground the grand abstractions of the factory sequences in the concrete personal experience of these socially marginal individuals, potentially redeeming the erasure of personal histories witnessed in the first two-thirds of the documentary (Q. Wang 2006: 252). Lastly, and perhaps most significantly in terms of this argument, Wang adopts an attitude towards contingency that is radically different from that of his predecessors, and which situates the contingent pro-filmic event firmly at the centre of the documentary.

This is demonstrated most clearly in a now-famous scene from *Rust* that takes place entirely within the confines of a tiny room in the zinc plant. The initial shot is empty of people: the camera is focused on the door, behind which hangs a large coat; to the front of shot are set a table and chair. We hear a voice from off-screen, and the camera pans left to reveal a worker, lying on a bench along the wall. He starts to talk about his past; his education, or rather lack of it, during what is clearly identifiable as the Cultural Revolution. “I was sent down for two years”, he says, before going on to outline how the disruptions of the period left him with only the bare minimum of skills: “It was the same for everyone my age, none of us got any education”. The camera cuts in closer as the man shifts slightly sideways, turning into the camera; he starts to talk about school exams, and we hear other people enter the room, one of whom passes in and out of the frame behind the worker, who continues talking. Suddenly a second voice interjects: “The plant’s shutting down in two days”. “What?” says our first worker, turning his face away from the camera to look outside the frame at this new interlocutor. “We’ve two more days” is the response. “Are you serious?” enquires the first worker. “Yeah. They’re shutting down the zinc smelting plant in two days” continues the voice. At this point the camera pans right to reveal the source of this information: one of the worker’s colleagues. This man reports that the news has just been broken by the factory manager; the camera then cuts to a third worker, with whom a discussion about the ethics of stealing a tool kit is initiated (is it theirs? Or does it belong to the factory?) A fourth man comes in; the three then exit, leaving behind the very first worker. The camera cuts to a medium close-up of his profile, cigarette in hand, silent and motionless. Then he sighs: “I can’t believe we’re bankrupt. It happened so fast”. The camera pauses for a few more seconds on his face, before cutting away to a long shot of the factory floor in operation. Wang, we see, has managed to capture the exact moment at which the zinc plant maintenance worker learns of the factory’s demise.

The resignation with which the plant's employees accept this news is in itself extraordinary, but the scene is significant in other ways. Firstly, it is a pivotal moment for this section of the film. In its wake, *Rust* shifts from examining the industrial life of the factory and its workers to the incredibly rapid process – a mere forty-eight hours – whereby the plant is closed down and the employees laid off. Indeed, the section concludes with an extended sequence following those workers who have been sent for de-toxification in the wake of the factory's collapse. It is also a turning point for the trilogy as a whole, for everything that occurs in *Remnants* is largely consequent upon it. The appropriation of land, the destruction of the residents' housing, their enforced removal and the dispersal of the community across the city: all of this is a result of the factory's bankruptcy. In a sense, then, it is the single moment within the entire film that is perhaps most representative of the experience Wang Bing is trying to convey: the destruction of working-class livelihoods at a particular time and in a specific place. And yet this was not a moment that was planned, or even predicted. As Wang points out, the maintenance worker, lying on the bench and talking about his childhood, had no idea that in ten minutes time his life would be changed irrevocably: the director certainly did not (quoted in Y. Zhang 2005). Indeed, when Wang started shooting, the Foundry was operating normally. He selected it not because it was obviously going bankrupt, but because of its status and historical importance (the Electric Cable Factory and the Steel Rolling Mill he chose in part because he had good relationships with certain of the employees, particularly in the former, and could therefore shoot scenes featuring the factory's leadership without interference) (X. Lü 2005: 127; B. Wang quoted in Y. Zhang 2005). Similarly, his decision to focus the final installment of the trilogy on the father and son relationship was a result of a chance encounter with the couple that occurred whilst he was shooting on the trains during *Rust* (B. Wang quoted in Y. Zhang 2005). When charged by Zhang Yaxuan that the structure and content of *West of the Tracks* are essentially the result of just such encounters, Wang acknowledges that the film's development was a combination of the contingent and the inevitable. Referring back to his luck at capturing the Foundry's bankruptcy in real time he says:

The fortuitous part was that it just so happened the factory I was filming was like that; but the inevitable aspect was that the area had over a hundred factories, many of which were in a state of decline that nobody could halt.

(quoted in Y. Zhang 2005)

The structure of the film is thus a delicate balance between chance and fate.

For some, such a statement suggests a certain equilibrium between the predictable and the unpredictable that is strongly reminiscent of the "public" documentaries of the early 1990s, and *West of the Tracks* is indisputably one of the few recent Chinese documentaries that displays overtly metaphorical elements along the lines of *The Square* or *No.16 Barkhor Street*. However, this obscures a significant divergence of opinion over the role that the contingent plays within the documentary *in toto*. Whereas in Duan's early work there is a sense that this element, whilst essential, is also potentially disruptive, and should therefore be controlled where possible by the director, Wang Bing appears to have embraced it at a far more fundamental level. Returning to the scene with the zinc



maintenance worker discussed above, Wang stresses that its significance is generated in part by its very unexpectedness:

This moment is extremely important. Although when we see it now we are prepared for it, at the time of filming there was no way to know [it was coming]. You [the viewer] and he [the worker] experience the moment together, [so] you will remember it very clearly.

(quoted in Y. Zhang 2005)

The moment is key not simply to the development of the film, but also, Wang appears to suggest, to our ability to empathise with its subjects and their story, and thus for the film to register with the audience. Far from impeding its function, contingency appears to expedite it.

### **Towards A Contingent Documentary Practice**

What I hope to have demonstrated is the increasing prominence given to the unexpected pro-filmic event in recent Chinese documentary, regardless of genre; and a concomitant tendency for directors to stress the positive, rather than the negative, aspects of this experience. This is significant for two main reasons. Firstly, it is indicative of a change in documentary film practice. The extensive pre-shoot preparation favoured by the early directors is being increasingly abandoned by contemporary documentary film-makers in favour of a far more laissez-faire approach. Wu Wenguang, for example, has now adopted a style of working that eschews such preparation altogether (quoted in J. Zhu and B. Mei, 2003: 75): with regards to *Fuck Cinema!*, his most recent documentary film, he talks about coming across the topic unexpectedly, rather than deliberately selecting it (W. Wu, interview 2005).<sup>20</sup> This sense of stumbling across the subject of one's film, sometimes literally, is echoed by other film-makers. Du Haibin, for example, says that he came across the vagrant boys who became the subject of *Along the Railroad* when he was actually out scouting for locations for a feature film he wished to shoot as a graduation piece (quoted in W. Wu 2001a: 213). Hu Xinyu started to shoot what eventually became *The Man* at the request of Lao Su, one of the protagonists, who thought he would be shortly leaving Taiyuan: the director never expected it to become the subject of a full-length film (quoted in Z. Cui 2005). Wang Bing similarly intended to shoot a feature film when he returned to Shenyang from Beijing. It was only when it became clear that the technical, logistical and financial demands of such an undertaking were significantly beyond his means that his thoughts turned to the documentary form (B. Wang quoted in Y. Zhang 2005). And, as with Wu Wenguang's new working style, the consequences have been a tendency to embark on shooting without any formal preparation or specific goal in mind. As Wang Bing says, after renting a DV camera and buying 20-odd DV cassettes, he suddenly found that, camera in hand, he was unsure what to do next: he had no clear sense of how to go about structuring his film in relation to a potential subject (quoted in Y. Zhang, 2005).

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<sup>20</sup> With *Fuck Cinema!* this is in fact literally the case. The subject of the documentary originally approached Wu to help him find a director or producer for a screenplay he had written. Wu agreed, and ended up shooting a documentary himself about the process.

Certain scholars (see e.g. Y. Zhang 2004) have described this as a self-conscious fetishization of an amateur aesthetic, locating it firmly within changes to the political economy of Chinese documentary production during the 1990s.<sup>21</sup> Yet I think this terminology obscures a second, equally important point: that the revaluation of the contingent pro-filmic event is indicative not simply of a change in film practice, but also of an understanding of what a documentary is, and how the film-maker should relate to his or her material. In the “public” documentary, the desire for the director to reveal the wider significance of the events that he or she is portraying resulted in an emphasis on editing as a way of shaping the material resulting from location shooting. Duan Jinchuan makes this quite clear when he says that the questions that arise for him during the editing process are “what structural material will emerge [through editing], or how to actualize my previous ideas [about the subject], sometimes to the point of having to do moderate restructuring: this is the situation when I make films” (quoted in W. Wang 2000: 132). The early documentary directors therefore came to their subjects with a particular set of issues – mostly political – that they were looking to express; the material they selected was, to some extent, a vehicle to illustrate these concerns, and they therefore structured it with this in mind. Contemporary directors, in contrast, display a very different attitude to their role and work. Increasingly, they seem to align the position of the documentary-maker with the transient or the fleeting. Wu Wenguang, for example, has recently begun to emphasize that over-intellectualising a documentary kills its most instinctive aspects; in order to preserve these, the director should adopt the role of the “wanderer” (*manyouzhe*), moving from place to place until he or she alights on something that catches his or her eye (quoted in X. Lü 2003: 19). Ou Ning, one of the founder members of the Guangzhou visual arts collective *U-thèque*, puts it even more succinctly, comparing the documentary maker to the flâneur (N. Ou 2003: 35). The attitude of these directors towards their material is thus inevitably rather different from that of their predecessors. Here, for example, is Wang Bing on planning *West of the Tracks*:

When you start you may plan the structure, style and content of your film, but as you gradually get into it, when the object of your shoot reveals itself is not up to you. In the midst of constant development, things have their own cycle, and you have to slowly wait for this. Only once this cycle has been constituted will you feel that your film is slowly beginning to take shape.

(quoted in Y. Zhang 2005)

Wang here implies that the nature and structure of his documentary was not imposed externally, or developed prior to shooting. Instead, it evolved in no small part out of the process of interaction with his environment and his subject matter. Thus, to quote Zhu

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<sup>21</sup> Duan Jinchuan has implied this by criticizing much contemporary Chinese documentary for its failures of preparation, and in misunderstanding the technical film language germane to the genre (quoted in X. Lü 2003: 98-99); failures that he in part ascribes to a lack of appropriate training in China’s various film schools and institutes (J. Duan, roundtable, 2005; J. Duan, interview 2005).

Chuanming: "The excitement of shooting a documentary lies in never knowing what you will be going to shoot; sometimes not even you yourself know what you are doing." (quoted in J. Zhu and B. Mei 2003: 329). The contingent is no longer a problem that the documentary-maker must manage: it is the *raison d'être* of the form.

This would appear to be a major, even radical shift. No longer is the documentary understood, in almost allegorical terms, as a means whereby universally applicable truths about society as a whole are conveyed through observation of a part. Instead, it seems to have become synonymous with a far more fragmented approach to immediate experience, one in which documentary seems to have become the preferred mode through which an increasingly urgent sense of the uncertainty inherent in material reality can be conveyed. Yet, distinct as these two conceptualizations appear to be, I would argue that the latter is not in fact a radical departure from the basic principles of the early NDFM, as embodied in the concept of *xianchang*, but an extension of these to their logical conclusion. What contemporary film-makers have done, in rejecting the "metaphorical" mode derived from Frederick Wiseman, and the quasi-ethnographic approach to documentary practice that underpinned it, is to abandon those methods adopted by the early NDFM directors in defiance of the dynamic of contingency inherent in location shooting. This move suggests a whole-hearted embrace of the contingent that is reflected across contemporary Chinese documentary in a variety of different ways: in the emergence of new forms, such as the "private" documentary, that explicitly reject the metaphorical; in the emergence of narratives that increasingly foreground the unexpected pro-filmic event, rather than subordinate it to editing and elements of the diegesis; and in new ways of understanding the documentary and its relationship to the world; ways in which the role of the director is to capture random experience, rather than to control or mould it. Capturing the contingent thus becomes an end in itself, rather than a means to an end. None of these ideas are new to the Chinese documentary scene *per se*; all are implicit in the aesthetic of *xianchang* as the moment began to develop it in the early 1990s. It is only now, however, that a full and uninhibited exploration of this theory is possible. That the so-called "first" and "second" generation of documentary directors insist so vehemently on the differences between their work may reflect the fact that it shares more common ground than either side is prepared to admit.

## Conclusion

What I hope to have demonstrated in this paper is the extent to which Chinese documentary is the product of the interaction between context and practice. There is a tendency in criticism to see the "public" and "private" forms that I have explored here as indicative either of particular intellectual or political traditions, or of technological and institutional changes, with both interpretation tending to emphasize the distinctions between what are seen as different stages of the NDFM. Yet the continued importance of *xianchang* over the period forced directors to mediate their politics through this particular aesthetic, and the practical constraints it imposed. The emergence of new forms of documentary is therefore as indicative of an increasing acceptance of the logic of the aesthetic, and the opportunities this provided, as it is of a shift in political

positioning. Indeed, any comment to the latter effect must incorporate reference to the former in order for it to be of any validity.

Yet what this also suggests is that the “interiorisation” of Chinese documentary – the growth of a genre that takes an “I” as its subject rather than a “We” – may not simply be a rejection of the political, one that thereby reduces the “social significance” of the film-makers’ work (Y. Zhang 2004: 131). Indeed, it may not be a simple interiorisation at all. Instead, it may be the consequence of accepting a high degree of contingency as a necessary part of documentary practice – and indeed of material existence *per se*. In consequence, this shift may actually be both a product of, and serve as commentary on, the nature of social change in the PRC during the post-Reform era. As such, it deserves further sustained attention.

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